TOP 10 REASONS
WHY LEADERS AND LEADERSHIP TEAMS STRUGGLE

By Rick Kinsley

We have been fortunate to coach leaders and leadership teams in all kinds of organizations ranging from start-ups to Fortune 50 companies, to not-for-profit institutions, to governmental entities, to public and private colleges and universities. Through our work, we have identified common obstacles that leaders and leadership teams often encounter which limit their effectiveness. In this paper, we outline what we consider the 'Top Ten' obstacles, and we provide a few tips regarding how these challenges can be overcome. We welcome your feedback.

REASON #10: They are self-deceived.

As we like to tell the leaders we work with, "I have good news, bad news, and worse news". The "bad news" is that we are all, at times, self-deceived. Despite having the best of intentions, as leaders sometimes we can inhibit progress. We unwittingly put the achievement of important goals at risk by our approach. Yet leaders often cannot see their negative impact. This is because they are self-deceived. The "worse news" is that such self-deceived leaders are also spreading their affliction throughout their organizations through their interactions.

To illustrate the point, we ask leaders to consider people with whom they have worked during their career who they found difficult to work with in some way. Then we ask if they thought these difficult people saw themselves as part of the problem? Invariably, the answer invariably is: "no, they didn't" – that's self-deception. I have the best of intentions but I'm breaking dishes, causing chaos, and otherwise inhibiting the achievement of shared objectives. How can this be?

At this point of our process leaders become unsettled by the unthinkable prospect that they might actually be part of the problem. They might be what is holding their team and/or their organization back. They may be an impediment to success. To be sure, this is a bitter realization, and it is not easily acknowledged let alone accepted. However, just before all hope is lost, we spring the "good news": they already possess the ability to overcome self-deception! (Sadly, they're just choosing not to).

As Simon Sinek has professed, leadership is a choice – it is not a rank, or something bestowed by an external source. Rank implies responsibility and authority, not necessarily leadership. Leadership takes courage, it's a conscious choice, a conscious decision to be the kind of person people want to follow, and the cost of leadership is one's self-interest. As leaders, our source of influence is far deeper than our outward behaviors. Our influence is determined by what people believe to be our intent, or as The Arbinger Institute would say our "way of being". The Arbinger Institute has done extensive foundational work on the topic of self-deception. We share their view that self-deception is the common thread that runs through most chronic, vexing leadership and organizational problems including leaders who inhibit rather than enable success despite their good intentions.

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In a dynamic environment where performance, if not survival, depends upon adaptation and continuous improvement, how can organizations excel when key leaders most in need of improvement feel no need to change? Imagine an organization comprised of individuals whose primary focus is what's best for the organization. Where every individual's first choice is to actively help colleagues achieve shared goals. Where personal agendas and politics don't exist, and where people at all levels enthusiastically help others get results. Impossible? We thought so at one time, we no longer do. We have had the opportunity to work with organizations which have created such an environment. They have done so by methodically selecting and investing in the development of strong followership skills in their leaders; leaders who know how to avoid self-deception.

REASON #9: They focus on 'hard' and 'soft' skills.

We have conducted more than 5,000 leadership assessments since founding our consultancy some 15 years ago. We can count on fewer than ten fingers the number of assessments that identify a leader's so-called 'hard skills' as their key development need. It's almost never the hard skills. Instead it's the 'soft' or what we prefer to call 'followership' skills that limit their success. This makes sense when you consider that most leaders would not have advanced their careers if they did not have strong business or functional skills – those skills are likely what brought them to the 'dance' in the first place. However, as their leadership responsibilities grow, their hard skills are no longer as helpful as they once were. They become increasingly dependent on strong followership skills to succeed, they learn that "soft skills enable hard results".

Followership requires the mastery of five seemingly simple, yet deceptively challenging core leadership principles:

1 The ability to focus on shared objectives while avoiding self-deception

2 Building, nurturing and sustaining strong professional relationships

3 Actively teaching and enabling others to achieve shared objectives

4 Providing effective performance and developmental feedback

5 Being decisive when corrective action is necessary

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Each of these core principles is a prerequisite for the next, and they are all highly inter-dependent. To build successful, healthy relationships requires that I focus on shared objectives and avoid self-deception. Only then can I lead and participate effectively without being preoccupied with trying to prove what a great leader I am, or how valuable I am to the team. If a leader is struggling with any of these followership principles the solution often resides in the former principle. For example, if I'm viewed as ineffective in providing helpful feedback, it's likely that I'm not effectively teaching or enabling others to achieve shared objectives. It is like building a house – you can't work on the second floor if the first level is unstable, or the foundation is weak.

REASON #8: They try to prove their self-image.

We all have a self-image, in fact we have multiple self-images (not to be confused with multiple personalities ala Sybil). We have images of ourselves as a spouse, as a parent, as a sibling, as a son/daughter, as a colleague, as a boss, as a direct report, etc. This is perfectly normal. However, a problem arises when we try to prove our self-image. We do this by treating others like objects; we essentially use them as tools to help us sustain or prove our self-image.

As a leader, my self-image might be something like this: "I'm the sort of person who can solve complex problems." Now, is there anything wrong with having the ability to solve complex problems? Of course not. However, if my objective is to prove that about myself, I'm likely to be less open to others' ideas, I'm likely to try to impose my solutions, I'll be more resistant to challenges to my thinking, and in general, I'll more likely to act like what we affectionately call a "jerk".

In our coaching work, we help our clients identify their self-images. We do so not to make them paranoid, but to help them avoid self-deception when their self-image is threatened. When our self-image is threatened, we tend to want to repel the threat by proving our self-image. Our objective becomes proving our self-image, not achieving our shared objectives.

REASON #7: They betray their sense of right and wrong.

Our sense of right and wrong is that intuitive sense that comes from our upbringing, our life experiences, our values, our education, our faith, etc. Most leaders' sense of right and wrong is strong and reliable, although not infallible. When leaders betray their sense of right and wrong or act in a way that is contrary to they way they think they should, they risk being self-deceived. When we betray our sense of right and wrong, it becomes very important to us to justify our actions, mostly to ourselves.

When we seek justification for our self-betrayals, we co-opt whatever we need to justify our choice. We can blame others, we can exaggerate, we feel victimized, we are self-righteous, and most of all we are focused on ourselves, not on others and not on our shared objectives. We listen only to improve our argument, we might withdraw, disengage, become defensive and in general become lost in our self-centered pursuit of justification for our choices.

REASON #6: They collude.

Leaders and teams that succumb to the psychological phenomenon known as the common attribution error, tend to falsely attribute the negative behaviors of others to their character (internal attribution), while they attribute their own negative behaviors to their environment (external attribution). They like to believe that they do bad things because of the situations they are put in, but somehow, they easily come to the conclusion that others do bad things because they are predisposed to being bad. Similarly, they can attribute other people's success to their environment and their own success to their character – i.e. we are inherently good and talented while others are merely lucky.

This cynical phenomenon results in our establishing 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'. We give those in our in-group the benefit of the doubt, while we tend to suspect the intentions and motivations of those in our out-group. Over time, we develop a hypothesis about other individuals or groups and we preclude the possibility that we've misjudged them; instead, we look for evidence to support our hypothesis – we collude with them. We jeopardize shared objectives to prove that our beliefs and actions toward our out-group are justified.

This is actually a very common phenomenon in which individuals or groups conspire to jeopardize shared goals. The root cause is again, self-deception - those engaged in collusion are deeply self-deceived. They cannot see (or choose not to see) how their collusive behavior is impeding progress. Their interest is winning the blame game they are playing, not achieving shared goals.

REASON #5: They are invulnerable.

Leaders often have been raised in corporate cultures that foster and even reward invulnerability. The axioms "never let 'em see you sweat" or "look out for #1" are really helpful if you're in cell block C, but in business, they're deadly. After all, why would anyone express vulnerability if you are not sure it will be reciprocated let alone rewarded? Leaders who are invulnerable do not inspire trust, they inspire self-preservation, they inspire 'C.Y.A.' behavior. They do not inspire followers – such leaders are essentially on a long walk by themselves.

Inspiring trust requires us to be vulnerable ourselves. The easier we make it for others to see us a not dissimilar from them, as someone with flaws, development needs, yet as someone who is deeply committed to shared objectives.

REASON #4: They preserve the phony peace.

Because they are invulnerable, because they do not trust one another, such leaders cannot engage in productive conflict or debate. Meetings become long, boring exercises in which participants avoid productive exchanges to protect their interests – they preserve the phony peace and avoid productive conflict. Like most of us, they find conflict uncomfortable. They place avoiding the discomfort of conflict ahead of achieving shared objectives. Again, they tend to listen to improve their argument, not to better understand all sides of an issue, let alone the best solution.

Effective leaders mine for conflict, they facilitate debate, they demand it. Intense debate and healthy conflict are always uncomfortable to some degree, but they are the path to meaningful discovery, to the achievement of extraordinary performance.

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REASON #3: They lack commitment.

As Patrick Lencioni advised, commitment requires clarity - i.e. what specifically are we committing to; with no ambiguity or assumptions; as well as buy-in or honest, intellectual, emotional support. It's important to note that commitment does not require consensus. Consensus is often the best idea watered-down to something with which no one can disagree. Great teams learn to buy-in even when they may have originally vigorously disagreed with the idea. Their goal is not to have their idea prevail, but to have the best idea prevail.

REASON #2: They exhibit one-way accountability.

Teams that under-perform often have one particular characteristic in common – the boss is the only one who provides feedback, he/she is the only one to hold other members of the team accountable. This is because such teams lack trust. They place preserving the phony peace ahead of holding one another accountable to shared standards of behavior and performance. They rarely, if ever, provide one another feedback. When a member of the team is inhibiting progress and failing to meet their commitments to the team, they look to the boss to bring the wayward team member into line.

Such teams tend to falsely assume their ability to predict how one another will react under certain circumstances is "trust" – e.g. "I know if I call Bob out on that he'll get angry". That's not trust, they just understand their own dysfunctionality – obviously those are two different attributes. Building trust is not so much a function of time, it's a function of courage. When teams ask us how long it will take them to develop trust our response is always the same: "How long will it take for someone on the team to have the courage to be vulnerable? To acknowledge their mistakes? To ask for help? To sacrifice their self-interests to achieve shared objectives?"

REASON #1: They fail to focus on shared results.

Even if a team establishes a level of trust, engages in productive debate, commits, and has clear accountabilities, they can still stumble by failing to focus on results. Why is it often difficult to focus on results? Reasons vary, but most often it's due to self-interest - look out for #1 stuff, prison behaviors as we call them. They engage in self-preservation or they fear failure, and/or they are self-deceived and can't see how they as individuals or as a team are part of the problem. They are not unified by well-defined, shared objectives. It is if they were playing a team sport and are losing by a large margin, yet they seek recognition as individuals for their individual 'great game'.

So, if you are struggling as an individual leader, or if you are a member of a leadership team that is struggling, take heart – you have the ability to achieve extraordinary performance. It's a choice; it's your choice. Good luck!